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## THE PLACE OF BIBLICAL CRITICISM IN THE SUNDAY SCHOOL.

### A SYMPOSIUM.

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A WIDENING chasm divides the teaching of the Bible in schools and colleges from its teaching in many Sunday schools. The accepted principles of the development of life and of the growth of literature, as taught in public schools, are being contradicted in Sunday schools, in the effort to defend theories of the creation of the universe and of the composition of the Bible which are contrary to known laws of the evolution of nature and of literature. The consequences of such opposing teachings are not difficult to predict.

The main conclusions of biblical criticism are now accepted with practical unanimity by all scholars who have given attention to them. They have been reached by patient investigation, and have displaced traditional theories among educated people, just as the truths of geology and astronomy have supplanted the age-long imaginations of men concerning the structure of the earth and the laws of the universe, that the sun, moon, and stars revolved around the earth. These conclusions have entered into modern biblical literature as an essential part of it. They are assumed in nearly all teachers' Bibles and recent commentaries, and in the majority of lesson helps. The last step, their acceptance in the popular mind, can be hindered only temporarily by unreasoning conservatism, ignorance, or prejudice.

The Sunday school is not the place to follow or to work out the processes by which these conclusions have been reached; still less the place to controvert them. But the results of criticism, so far as they correct false theories of the Bible and illumine its revealed truth, should be known and used by the teacher to increase the power of his teaching. It is established beyond reasonable doubt that the Bible as we have it was not written before the people existed for whom it was prepared, or

apart from their experience. Its songs expressed their aspirations; its laws were made by their legislators to meet their requirements as their nation developed; its ritual grew out of their experience of communion with God, and changed as that experience expanded; its history was written by patriots who sought to set forth the life and deeds of the Israelites according to their ideal; its philosophy is the reflection of men who saw the working of God in the world as the God of their nation for its triumph over other nations and for his glory. Its unity is evidenced according as its purpose is fully revealed in the life of Christ and the planting of the kingdom of God and of his church by his disciples. That unity, and the controlling purpose manifested throughout the whole Bible, are convincing proof that it brings to men the supreme revelation, giving them the knowledge of God's will concerning their character and destiny.

The teacher who applies these principles to his study of the Bible, with the use of literature upon it which is now abundant—of which the BIBLICAL WORLD is an example—will be prepared to guide his pupils to find Christ in the Bible, and to find in Christ the eternal truth by which he must live in order to fulfil his destiny. Such a teacher will not find himself in conflict with modern knowledge or the moral ideals of his pupils; and he will do his part effectively to keep the Christian faith of this generation from eclipse, and the Sunday school from falling into neglect.

A. E. DUNNING.

EDITOR OF "THE CONGREGATIONALIST,"  
Boston, Mass.

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There are Sunday schools and Sunday schools, and there is biblical criticism and biblical criticism. No one doubts that some biblical criticism should be taught in some Sunday schools, and no one would affirm that all sorts of biblical criticism should be taught in all Sunday schools. The question of the place of biblical criticism in the Sunday school is not simple, but complex.

Properly speaking, the Sunday school, as it exists, is not a

school. The best thing about it is that it is not a school. It is an institution which under the name of a school has formed itself by natural growth, adjusting itself to the needs that it has had to meet. It is an arrangement for bringing persons into contact for purposes of religious and ethical interinfluence. The studying of the Bible together serves as a common pursuit, without which the interplay of influence would be less easy of accomplishment. No other common pursuit, probably, would answer the purpose so well. But the results of the study are far less important than the results of the mutual exertion of influence. The founders of the Sunday school did not intend this. Nobody ever planned to have it so. Providentially here was a certain impulse in a certain environment, and the forces at work upon it wrought the product into this form.

This is generally true, though there are Sunday schools which have a genuine pedagogic character, and in that character are doing good work.

Of course, it is true that biblical criticism cannot be kept out of our Sunday-school studies. It will keep coming in, and by many different avenues. In the Sunday school that has been transformed into a school there may be, somewhere among the grades, a table and a row of seats devoted specifically to biblical criticism. And in every Sunday school the helps that are used will, in one way or another, echo one view or another of some of the problems of biblical criticism.

I have a profound conviction, however, that the true path of progress, in the Sunday school as in many other educational institutions, lies in the direction of doing fewer things and doing them better, rather than in the direction of doing more things. It is especially true that a class which devotes one half-hour in the week to class study is not a favorable place for settling problems that are either intricate or disputed. The perplexing questions and the questions concerning which we differ are the very best things for us to study—somewhere, but not everywhere; and not, I think, in the Sunday school.

Most of us who are in such a way interested in the Bible that we study it in the Sunday school will agree, I suppose, in thinking

that the Bible is full of passages bearing on human character and conduct, for the present life and for the life to come; passages that are so intensely vital and true as to be to us a veritable revelation of the mind of God. I fear that our theories of biblical criticism would lead us into disputes if we attempted to formulate a basis of agreement much more specific than this. In my judgment, the most profitable study of the Bible, for most Sunday schools, is that which mainly confines itself to the contents and the practical bearings of those parts of the Scriptures which directly illustrate the problems of life and duty. Of all things, a Sunday school should avoid neglecting the work which it can do well for the sake of attempting work that is beyond its reach.

WILLIS J. BEECHER.

AUBURN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY,  
Auburn, N. Y.

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It may seem easy wittily to dispose of the whole matter by saying, "The place of biblical criticism in Sunday school is on the outside;" but is it so certain, then, that the truth in regard to the Bible ought not to be taught there? That biblical criticism has brought to light a wealth of formerly unknown truth concerning the history of Israel and the character and meaning of the Hebrew literature no one can doubt. That the viewpoint of present-day evangelical scholarship with regard to most biblical questions is different from that occupied twenty-five years ago is also evident, not only to ministers, but to most of the intelligent laymen connected with our Sunday schools. Even those who are not academically trained, or well read theologically, are sure that something has happened. Many of these are eagerly inquisitive to know whether there is a new "orthodoxy" which, while it takes account of all the valid results of modern criticism, yet finds itself able to hold to the great fundamental faiths of Christianity.

Notwithstanding, then, the acknowledged delicacy of the situation, and admitting that it is better even yet to do or say nothing rather than to do or say the wrong thing, or the right thing in the wrong way, I am beginning to feel that there is a

present need in Sunday-school work of a greater utilization of the results of modern biblical criticism.

1. Use should be made of biblical criticism in normal and Bible classes and in advanced courses of study.

George Adam Smith, when he was once asked at Chautauqua what place biblical criticism had in the pulpit, replied: "I want to go into the pulpit with a clean face, but I prefer not to leave any soapsuds in my hair." The Sunday school is not the place for a discussion of processes nor for the statement of negations, nor for the presentation of merely technical scientific results, however well assured. It is a school, not merely or chiefly for the acquirement of technical knowledge, but for the building of character and the development of holy impulses to right living.

Most thinking people, however old-fashioned, would admit that all the new knowledge which "tends to edification" may be used in the advanced Bible and normal classes of the Sunday school. But it certainly does not tend to edification to teach as certainties theories which modern evangelical scholarship has outgrown, or to deny or ignore what such teachers have almost unanimously come to accept. I hold that the main affirmative results of critical study should be frankly stated, and that the new light which has been thrown upon ancient oriental life and its literary habits, whether obtained from travel, archæological discovery, or through textual and other criticism, ought certainly to be utilized by those having in charge the preparation of advanced courses of study. If the proper course of study cannot be given us through the ordinary channels from which our present inadequate courses of study have been received, there should be a combined effort on the part of well-trained scholars from the various denominations to originate and publish at least supplemental courses which shall meet the demands of advanced knowledge and pedagogy.

Very much depends upon obtaining the right kind of teachers for such normal and Bible classes. They should be devoted Christians, full of uncommon "common-sense." A great Bible scholar may make a very poor Sunday-school teacher, although,

other things being equal, it will hardly be affirmed that knowledge is a necessary hindrance to success.

2. The use of biblical criticism in the younger classes of the Sunday school, and in preparing courses of study for such classes.

After all, the main function of biblical criticism in the Sunday school is to safeguard the scholars from false teaching, so that they will not have to unlearn in later years what they learned in Sunday school, or else drift off into infidelity. My judgment would be that 90 per cent. of the prevailing intellectual skepticism has arisen because of childhood misconceptions as to what truths were fundamental to Christianity. These men have discovered the unreliability of certain things which they were taught to believe, and, supposing these beliefs to be essential to Christianity, they have given up all faith in the Christian system.

The chief use of critical knowledge in the Sunday school is protective. It preserves the child from the impression that Christianity is founded on the backbone of Jonah's whale, and that the value of the Bible as God's Book of Salvation hinges upon the quality of Hebrew spoken by Balaam's ass, or upon the absolute inerrancy of the chirography or of the memory of the Bible writers, or their miraculous knowledge of universal history or twentieth-century science.

CAMDEN M. COBERN.

ST. JAMES METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH,  
Chicago.

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Some years since a New York publisher found himself at a loss how to teach the Bible to his children. He could not teach it to them as he had learned it in his childhood; he did not know how to present the so-called critical view in a constructive manner, nor did he know any work which would so present it to children. Finding others in the same predicament, he concluded that a book was needed. The result was *Scriptures, Hebrew and Christian*, named more felicitously perhaps in the English edition *The Bible for Home and School*, in the preparation of

which I co-operated. Our object was to let the Bible speak for itself, free from the conventional and traditional ideas represented in its ordinary form, its peculiar phraseology, the arrangement and titles of its books. Stories were told as stories, songs and poems written as songs and poems, laws as laws. Contents, chapter headings, and running synopses were introduced, and the book was in general printed and gotten up like an ordinary everyday book. The book proved to be interesting to intelligent children, fond of reading; a book which they would take and read for pleasure without compulsion and without urgency.

With my own children, as they have grown up, my plan, or rather my wife's plan, has been to start them with Foster's *Story of the Bible*, which they always find extremely interesting; next we give them the work of which I have just spoken; and, last of all, the Bible (generally in the Revised Version). At family prayers we read from all sorts of versions and translations, of late using frequently Ballentine's *Modern American Bible*. The result has been an interest in, and affection and reverence for, the Bible, with a freedom from traditionalism and literalism.

Now, such a course as this is not practicable with my Sunday school, which is composed largely of children from very plain and not highly educated families, who do little or no reading outside of sensational papers, occasional cheap magazines, and a few novels. I have, of course, some children of more cultivated and reading people. I try to reach the parents of such children and my teachers by talks and lectures from time to time. I recommend to them, or place in their hands, good plain books embodying some of the best constructive results of modern Bible study—in addition to those already mentioned, Moulton's, Kent's, and Sander's books, *The Bible as Literature*, Cornill and Robertson Smith on the prophets, etc., etc. I am ready and eager to answer questions, and willing to guide anyone in further and more critical courses of reading; but I am very far from urging them into such a course of study. Criticism and the critical attitude I carefully avoid. I never say, "This is not what you have been taught to believe, or the traditional view is not correct;" but, "This means so and so, this is so and so."



At times I meet classes of teachers or scholars, or both, in the chart room, where we have casts, relief maps, models, maps, and pictures; at times in the children's service I address the school as a whole on some Bible theme. If at such times I have occasion to use an Old Testament story, I tell it as a story as effectively as I know how. If by any chance there is some teaching of ethics un-Christian in character, as in the story of Jael and Sisera, I bring that out and correct it by a reference to the teaching of Jesus, believing that the comparison is wholesome for them.

In our teaching we commence in the infant class with simple stories of Jesus, Bible verses, hymns, cards, etc., together with the Lord's Prayer. In the lower primary it is the stories of the Old Testament, those which children understand and love, with the Creed and the Ten Commandments. In the upper primary it is an outline of the life of Christ, very simple, chiefly by oral teaching and recitation. In the grammar grades it is a preparation for confirmation and communion, with the Prayer Book as the text. This gives the scholars a good deal of Bible, but arranged for purposes of moral and doctrinal instruction, not historical or critical study. After confirmation they go into Bible classes, where they may take up almost anything—the prophets, the Acts, the gospels, the life of Jesus, the life of Paul, Old Testament heroes. Here my teachers are diverse—some very conservative, not knowing or not liking modern, critical views; some progressive, and intelligently interested in the new scholarship. To some extent I suppose that their different views affect their teaching and influence the minds of their scholars. But there is less difference of result than might at first sight be expected, because in general all are concerned with the problems of life, and the application to those problems of the teaching of the Bible; so that critical or historical or archæological matters are very minor issues.

To sum up: Biblical criticism, as such, does not enter our Sunday school. We try to give a certain amount of definite, distinct teaching, which shall put the children in possession of the essential facts and doctrines of the Christian religion; then

we encourage and instruct them, so far as we can, to read and study the Bible intelligently. We give opportunities to teachers and older scholars to learn the best results of modern scholarship; but we never consciously present the negative or critical side. Our object is to make the Bible a real book to them, intelligible, interesting, dealing with vital problems; and to make them read and study it in a common-sense, broad-minded, and modern spirit, but withal reverently. We banish the critical processes; but we seek quietly and without any spirit of antagonism to introduce the best constructive or reconstructive results of modern scholarship.

JOHN P. PETERS.

ST. MICHAEL'S CHURCH,  
New York.

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What is the function of the Sunday school? It seems to me to vary with different places. Sometimes it will be a "children's church," and sometimes primarily or entirely a school.

When it is the children's church, as it is in most mission districts, the object is not so much to teach large interpretations of truth as to impress and make operative so much of truth as is needed to complete life. But in other places, where the children attend worship in the church, Sunday school is primarily a place for studying God's Word.

In one sense, I cannot see that the higher criticism has anything to do with either kind of Sunday school. If it is the children's church, the object should be to impress the truth needed to perfect life; not any theory about the Bible, but its contents and their relation to conduct.

On the other hand, where the children attend Sunday school for study, and not for worship, it seems to me that the object should still be to gain a knowledge of the contents of the Scriptures, and not of the time or method of their composition. Very few Sunday schools, for many years to come, will have teachers who will be competent to teach even the rudiments, or the simplest results, of criticism. In my opinion, the Book should be studied for what it contains, in order that its contents

may impress their messages in their own way on the youthful minds.

Gradually, as a generation of teachers is raised up who know what a boon has come to the world with criticism, they will learn how to adjust their knowledge to the needs of those whom they teach. But it should always be done in a constructive, and never in a destructive, way. It is possible to state the results of criticism without disturbing anyone's faith or arousing antagonism; indeed, so as to strengthen faith and disarm suspicion. It is easy to interpret the story of Eden as an allegory, and the story of Jonah as the record of a great evangelistic mission, without railing at other interpretations; and there is no reason why that should not be done as fast as competent teachers are found.

But, usually, the work of interpreting the principles of criticism had better be left to the pulpit, and the Sunday school confine itself to teaching the contents of the Bible, and to impressing such truths as may be essential to daily living. By this I do not mean that the new knowledge should be excluded, but only that for many years to come it will be impossible to secure persons able properly to teach or to apply it, simply because most teachers are themselves ignorant.

As fast as those better trained are found, they ought, if they are reverent and constructive, to be allowed to give to the children so much of the truth as they may be able easily to grasp. We little appreciate, I fear, how much even children seek the fullest light, and how much their loyalty to the church in the future depends on their being given rational answers to their questions now. They will not be able to follow such teaching in detail, but its results, so far as related to life, they should have as soon as persons competent to instruct are raised up—but, I must add with great earnestness, not before.

AMORY H. BRADFORD.

MONTCLAIR, N. J.

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That it is desirable to make a place in every well-regulated Sunday school for some measure of biblical criticism is, I think,

beyond controversy. Every such school is supposed to be primarily for the study of the Holy Scriptures, and why should they ignore or seek to avoid important questions about the original texts, the authorship and composition of the different books of the canon, and their probable chronological order? Much information on all these subjects may be acquired without a knowledge of the original languages of the Bible. A competent teacher could easily conduct a series of most helpful lessons in textual criticism, with a class of boys and girls twelve to fifteen years old, by means of the Authorized Version and the Revised Version of the New Testament, simply comparing a selection of passages (*e. g.*, Matt. 6:13; 17:21; Mark 9:29; 11:26; Luke 9:55; John 5:4; Acts 8:37; 1 Tim. 3:16; 1 John 5:7), and explaining why such changes have been made.

It would seem equally easy to make the young people of our schools familiar with the nature and the methods of higher criticism. Take, for example, the book of Isaiah. Why should not any class of adults, under proper leadership, examine the facts and reasons now so widely accepted as proofs of its composite character? Persons old enough to perceive distinctive style, thought, purpose, and plan, as usually obvious in different writers, ought to find it both interesting and profitable to study and judge for themselves the question whether the sixty-six chapters of Isaiah are more naturally explained as a compilation of the writings of several prophets than as the work of one man. It certainly requires no advanced age nor superior intelligence to make a list of reasons for and against each of these views, and to form some reasonable judgment as to their relative weight. Perhaps a still more simple illustration of the practical nature of such study may be presented in the book of Proverbs, in which some eight or nine distinct collections of proverbs are easily traceable, but all put together into one book and headed with the title of "Proverbs of Solomon, Son of David, King of Israel."

Such critical study of the biblical writings would enliven the practical exposition of each separate part, and result in a far more intelligent conception of the oracles of God. But for such biblical study in the Sunday school a competent body of teachers

is absolutely necessary. Scores and hundreds of our people, young and old and middle-aged, are even anxious to be instructed in these analytical and inductive methods of searching the Scriptures; but only here and there, as something quite exceptional, do we find Sunday-school classes engaged in this kind of biblical research. We cannot doubt, however, that there is a place for such work in most of our churches and schools. The one conspicuous and lamentable fact is that competent and willing teachers for these places are very, very few. And for this reason, mainly, we fear that it will be a long time before our Sunday schools generally find it practicable to make a place for the more critical study of the Bible.

MILTON S. TERRY.

GARRETT BIBLICAL INSTITUTE,  
Evanston, Ill.

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In considering the place of biblical criticism in the Sunday school, we need to understand and agree as to what we mean by the Sunday school, and what by biblical criticism. Without such understanding and agreement, we may be using the same words while we are talking about very different matters having little in common.

I speak of the Sunday school as a gathering of children and youth in classes under teachers, with some older persons in separate classes, for common Bible study; all the classes, younger and older, being brought together at the close for impressing by the superintendent as to the main lesson of the day. Its members are to be treated as undergraduate pupils, and not as post-graduate students. Many gatherings on Sunday or on another day, of another character or for other purposes, may be *called* the Sunday school; but this substantially is what is generally, and for a third of a century has been, known as the Sunday school. To have in mind something else, while speaking of the Sunday school, is to be the means of confusing or misleading those addressed, and of failing to accomplish the desired and announced purpose.

When Robert Dale Owen wrote a series of letters to Horace

Greeley, in favor of a modification of the ordinarily accepted marriage bond and customs, Mr. Greeley replied in substance: "Your proposed arrangement may be a great improvement on marriage union, and you are entitled to advocate it as such. But please don't call it marriage. Leave us our old-fashioned institution with all its flaws and gains; and call your new arrangement by another name."

As to biblical criticism, there is obviously a place for it in the Sunday school—as commonly understood. Both "higher criticism" and "lower criticism" should be used aright in the right place. Making clear the claims and evidence of the character and nature of the book or writing considered, and then showing the force and true meaning of the Bible passage under consideration for the day, is the duty of a teacher, within the limits and needs of the particular pupils taught.

But "destructive criticism," which is so common among a certain class nowadays, has no place in the Sunday school, even if it has in some other places. Seeking to show that truths which have been held precious for ages, and which are worthy of being studied and profited by, have no basis for acceptance or belief, is not to be tolerated in the Sunday school.

The true purpose, object, and sphere of criticism of the Bible, or of any other book, are the discerning and disclosing of the treasures and beauties of what is examined. Thus it has been from the days of Aristotle to this day. It requires marked ability, and a commendable spirit, to be a real Bible critic. A man of inferior ability and of an unworthy spirit can do a destructive work with reference to the Bible as a university professor, or as a Bible commentator. It is so in other spheres. A boy with a piece of smoked glass can see spots on the sun at noon-day; but it requires the ability of a scientist with the aid of a spectrum to show the beauty and separate colors of the sun's rays. Thus in every sphere of life.

The main question which a wise and competent scholar of a right spirit will consider as a Bible teacher, in addressing by voice or pen those in the Sunday school (and the question that he should weigh well before he speaks or writes), is this: How

can I so use my knowledge of the Bible and its truths as to enable the pupils I address to receive the greatest good from the reading and study of the portion of the Bible now under consideration? With this question properly considered and answered, one is likely to do well as to biblical criticism in the Sunday school.

H. CLAY TRUMBULL.

EDITOR OF "THE SUNDAY SCHOOL TIMES,"  
Philadelphia.

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The mere statement of the topic awakens antagonism in many persons. This is due to many causes, among which may be named sheer ignorance of what biblical criticism is, objection to the word "criticism" as applied to the Scriptures, prejudice because of denunciations of it by recognized spiritual leaders, fear of its effect upon faith, the destructive temper of some biblical critics, natural conservatism that clings to old methods of study, and the avowed desire to divorce scholastic matters from an institution that is considered to be wholly evangelistic in aim. Such persons believe that it is safer to endure limitations more or less clearly felt than to remove them by introducing a Trojan horse.

There are two questions involved in the topic, the first as prefatory to the second: What is biblical criticism? What is its place in the Bible school? Says Professor Bissell:

It is the aim of criticism to use all means at its command, such as grammar and lexicon, literary analysis, archæological discoveries, doctrinal teachings, logical and chronological adjustments, to find out whether current opinions concerning the origin of the books of the Bible are true or false; whether such books have been preserved to us in their integrity or have suffered losses in their transmission; whether their text as it now appears is original or derived, pure or composite.

As all this seems to be study about the Bible, rather than of the Bible, its place in the Bible school would, with many, be instantly settled. But the idea of the Bible school has been enlarged to include such studies, and they are essential for the knowledge of the contents of the Scriptures.

In so far as biblical criticism is the philological, literary, and

archæological study of the Bible, it may have a place in a few schools with a few persons. Otherwise it is barred by the intellectual and spiritual immaturity of teachers and pupils to whom it would be mentally and morally fruitless. We avoid the introduction of calculus into kindergartens.

In so far as biblical criticism is a body of affirmations concerning dates, authorship, and integrity of documents, the same remarks as above apply. It must also be remembered that many so-called results are still questionable, and that their nature is such as to shock the reverence of many for the Bible.

In so far as biblical criticism is a method of study, historical research, scientific investigation, rigidly loyal to facts and relentless in rejecting fancies, the sincere effort to treat the Bible honestly, there is need for it in every school, and it should hold the supreme place. There is no remedy for the foolish religious fads that have sprung out of false methods of Bible study except such a process. For such grotesque distortions and caricatures of Christianity there is no preventive comparable to it. The wild "isms" which leach our churches thrive because of the very methods of study which biblical criticism corrects.

Two considerations must control in the introduction of biblical criticism into any Bible school, both of which are to preserve the reverence of the student for the Scriptures and their supreme value for his spiritual life. These are:

The constructive spirit. It is wicked to destroy faith, even in the effort to enlarge it by a deeper confidence. The fresh intellectual elements must be so introduced as to preserve, and if possible strengthen, the confidence of the student in the Scriptures. Let the improved method of study add to the moral attitude that is buttressed by the faulty processes whose displacement is desirable.

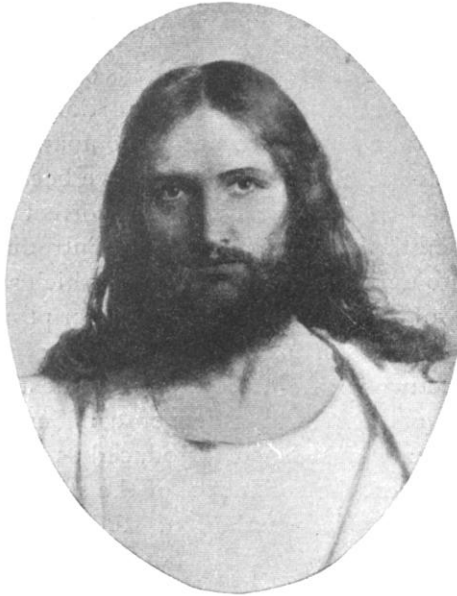
The method of adaptation. Our Lord himself practiced this when he spoke to men "as they were able to hear" (Mark 4: 33). He knew how to refrain from saying high things to immaturity (John 16: 12). There is no danger to faith if this principle of instruction be intelligently followed. The words of Jacob to Esau are good advice to enthusiastic reformers anywhere, particularly



in this matter : " My lord knoweth that the children are tender, and that the flocks and herds with me have their young : and if they overdrive them one day, all the flocks will die. Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant : and I will lead on gently, according to the pace of the cattle that are before me and according to the pace of the children, until I come unto my lord at Seir " (Gen. 33 : 13, 14).

W. C. BITTING.

MOUNT MORRIS BAPTIST CHURCH,  
New York City.



"CHRIST THE CONSOLER."

*From painting by Carl Bloch.*